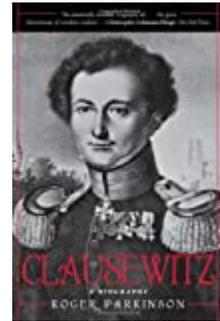




Roger Parkinson. *Clausewitz: A Biography.* New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002. 352 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8154-1233-5.



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Carl von Clausewitz is topical these days. His *On War* is the one constant on graduate syllabi for students in military history at American universities. It represents the first systematic attempt by a European scholar to re-think the meaning of warfare in light of the French Revolution. Clausewitz correctly theorized how nationalism completely altered the context of state-sanctioned violence. Previously rulers fought for territory and money; now entire societies clashed over ideology and the right to survive as independent political entities. Nearly two centuries after *On War* appeared, an important core of military scholars regularly publishes defense papers on Clausewitz' principle of friction in wartime. More importantly, the men currently running the White House and the Pentagon come from a political science background deeply influenced by Clausewitz's theories about waging modern war; they share his Hobbesian view of the world that military conflict is a necessary but regrettable means to further national interests. At a time when Clausewitz seems worryingly relevant to our society, it is unfortunate that Cooper Square's reprint of Roger Parkinson's 1971 biography contributes so little to the current debate.

Sadly, the book shows its age; one is left with the feeling that Clausewitz existed in a social vacuum. The only people we meet are his wife, other reformist generals such as Gerhard von Scharnhorst and August Gneisenau,

and rulers like Napoleon, Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia and Czar Alexander I. The author envisioned the work as the first English language biography of the Napoleonic-era Prussian officer, but some gaps in coverage are apparent. The author provides nothing on his childhood and little covering his later years. Rather, Parkinson offers a brief account of Clausewitz's entry into the army after 1789, considerably more detail on the period of Prussian military disaster and recovery from 1806 and 1815, and then some frustratingly brief and topical chapters on his later strategic writing.

More problematic than the spotty contextualization of Clausewitz's life is the lack of conceptualization regarding why this man and his writing are so important today. By focusing on certain details at the expense of the larger picture the author mislabels the Prussian King as politically inept and Clausewitz as simply a military reformer not interested in broader political issues. Parkinson presents the reader with very interesting and even moving episodes, such as shouting matches between Friedrich Wilhelm and his generals over mobilizing the nation, the catastrophic attempt by the French army to hold the Berezina crossing in 1812 and the near-coup by the generals that brought Prussia back into the war against Napoleon. Indeed, a real strength of this book is its engagement with the full horrors of Napoleonic war-

fare as seen through the 1812 Russian campaign; towns and villages burned, wounded left to die, civilians slaughtered, partisan warfare, tens of thousands dying in single battles. This is a total war, reminiscent of the 1941 and 1944 campaigns between a different Russia and Germany. Unfortunately, Parkinson does not connect these isolated episodes into a broader framework. For example, he explains Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm's refusal to create a national army as simply a case of monarchical venality and incompetence. A more accurate assessment is that the King realized that once the nation replaced his person as the source of loyalty and symbol of power and unity in Prussia, he would end up like Louis XVI. Parkinson provides numerous examples of Clausewitz's intense hatred for the French but does not explain it satisfactorily. Clearly motivated by nationalism, Clausewitz correctly viewed Napoleon as the main obstacle to Prussian domination of Germany. Only the full mobilization of all Prussian resources could beat back the French challenge. The author never places Clausewitz and other reformers into a broader nationalist framework that could have provided a unifying element for the book.

Parkinson certainly presents the reader with some telling examples of how modern war furthered the national project, but these passages are offered without a sense of irony and little analysis. For example, he points out that "Clausewitz disliked the Poles as much as he did the French.... He said that he had met with nothing but common impertinence, that he despised the Polish nation, which was cowardly and cringing in adversity, arrogant and insolent in better times. 'I have found people here in conditions which you cannot imagine,' Clausewitz had written. 'I am now quite convinced that the partition of Poland was a great benefit, decided by des-

tiny, that this nation, which has been in these conditions for thousands of years, should finally be released from them'" (p. 324). After 1789, Clausewitz realized that those nations that could not adapt to the new methods of warfare might cease to exist as political entities. Others would rule them. Clausewitz sees this as a "benefit" and "destiny"; it is simply the working out of history, organized along rational principles in the same way as modern war. It also explained why he raged against Friedrich Wilhelm to the point of leaving his country to serve the Czar; he feared that a national mobilization was the only way to preserve the kingdom's independence from other predatory nations. The contemporary imperial implications of this Hobbesian worldview are obvious.

Admittedly, historians' engagement with colonialism as a model of nationalism post-dates the writing of this book, but it is disappointing that Cooper Square did not commission a new introduction that would have addressed these issues. Also, the bibliography has not been updated and contains no titles written after 1968. This makes the book less useful for non-specialists. Furthermore, contemporary Clausewitz scholars such as Stephen Cimbala, Raymond Aron, Christopher Bassford and Michael Howard barely reference Parkinson. Despite the publisher's claim, the best English language introduction to Clausewitz for non-specialists remains Peter Paret's *Clausewitz and the State*.

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